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The *mīthāq*: a study in trust relationships in the Qurʾān

Nora S. Eggen

Remember God's blessing on you and His covenant with which you were bound when you said, 'We hear and we obey.' Be mindful of God: God has full knowledge of the secrets of the heart. (Q 5:7)

The covenant is a multifaceted concept in the Qurʾān, both in terms of its forms and functions.¹ A noun of instrument (*ism al-ālāh*), *mīthāq* is a derivative from the root *w-th-q*, which according to the lexicographer Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1005) has the root meaning 'contract' (*ʿaqd*) and 'consolidation' (*iḥkām*).² The lexical meaning of the verb *wathaqa* is according to the dictionary *Lisān al-ʿarab* 'to trust someone' (*iʿtmanahu*), and the two corresponding, synonym forms *mīthāq* and *mawthiq*, are seen as synonymous to *amānah*, 'trust'.³ There may thus be different semantic elements in the notion of *mīthāq*, and the question which arises from this is if and how these semantic elements are linked in the conceptualisations of the covenant in the Qurʾān. Is the *mīthāq* a contractual relationship, a trust based relationship, or both? I will approach this question through analysing a cluster of qurʾānic concepts related to trust, taking the concept of *mīthāq* as a primary point of reference.⁴

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to the participators on the workshop Texts and Genres of the Qurʾān in May 2009: Mona Helen Farstad, Thomas Hoffmann, Göran Larsson, Jan Retsö, Håkan Rydving, Gerd Marie Ådna, and in particular Ulrika Mårtensson, for valuable comments to earlier drafts of this article.

² Ibn Fāris, *Mufjam* 6: 85.

³ Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān* 10: 371; cf. translations 'it was, or became, firm, stable, fast or strong' or 'he trusted' (Lane (1877) 1984, 2: 3049) and 'to tie up', 'to secure', 'to be firm' and 'to trust' (Badawi & Abdel Haleem 2008: 650).

⁴ Citations of the Arabic text will be according to the reading of Ḥafṣ ʿan ʿĀṣim (*al-Qurʾān al-karīm*, 1420H) unless otherwise noted. Translations of the Qurʾān will follow M.A.S. Abdel Haleem's translation (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004). Clarifying and explaining square brackets in his translation has however in most cases been removed, and I have retained the qurʾānic forms in personal names (i.e. Ibrāhīm for Abraham). Further modifications to Abdel Haleem's translation, and occasional references to a few other translations, will be duly noted in each case.

Stability and flux of the qur^ānic text

At the outset of this study I maintain as a basic assumption that the qur^ānic text is simultaneously a stable and a flexible textual unit in terms of its linguistic makeup and its historicity. Qur^ānic semiotics is grounded in the qur^ānic concepts of its divine nature (Q 4:82) as ‘God’s speech’ (*kalāmu llāh*; Q 2:75; 9:6; 48:15) ‘sent down’ (*tanzīl*; Q 26:192; 41:2) in a ‘clear Arabic language’ (*bi-lisānin ‘arabiyyin mubīn*; Q 26:195), being a ‘reading in Arabic’ (*qur’ānan ‘arabiyyan*; Q 41:2; 43:2) which is ‘without flaws’ (*lā rayba fīhi*; Q 2:2). Hence the qur^ānic sign is not what is mostly understood as the linguistic sign, namely the word, but a divine sign (*āyah*) which resides in the particular interdependent duality of the form (*lafẓ*) and the content (*ma‘nā*), not on the level of single words, but on the level of textual units.⁵ Whereas most Arabic linguists resorted to the view of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign (the word),⁶ there is according to the qur^ānic semiotics nothing arbitrary in the divine sign (the *āyah*): ‘[A] Scripture whose *āyāt* are perfected, then set out clearly from One who is all wise, all aware.’ (Q 11:1)

The linguistic stability of the qur^ānic text is thus vouched for by its expression in a particular wording in the Arabic language. Consequently, the qur^ānic sign, the *āyah*, must remain unsplit in order to remain a divine sign. This raises the crucial question of translation. Any translation is dependent upon splitting the sign of the source language in order to reinstall the meaning through a new sign in the target language. The word or textual unit in the target language is a new form aiming at expressing the same content as in the source language. In translating the qur^ānic wording new linguistic signs are created, but the divine signs residing in the relationship between the form and the content of the exact wording of the source text, cannot, according to the qur^ānic semiotics, be recreated.⁷

⁵ The word as a linguistic sign is what the linguist ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078) terms *simah* in a quote which recalls the Saussurian terminology of the *signifiant* and the *signifié*: ‘[T]he words being signs for those meanings and to their being intended by them.’ (Margaret Larkin’s translation, Larkin 1995: 62) In the qur^ānic discourse a *sīmā* denotes a ‘mark’ or ‘characteristic’ (Q 2:273; 7:46 f.; 47:30; 48:29; 55:41). Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī traces the root of *sīmā* to *w-s-m* with the verbal noun *wasm* meaning ‘marking’ (*ta‘thīr*) (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, *al-Mufradāt*: 539). Another derivative, *mutawassim*, denotes ‘[O]ne who knows a thing by its outward signs’ (Penrice (1969) 2004: 159). According to at least one view, the Kūfan, the Arabic word for ‘word’, *ism*, is semantically connected to *sīmā*, although the etymology is contested (C.H.M. Versteegh 1977: 175 f.). Arthur Jeffery holds that *sīmā* originates in the Greek *sema* (σῆμα), ‘a sign, mark or token’, but the term is not in al-Suyūṭī’s list of possibly foreign terminology (Jeffery 1938: 184; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān* 1: 431–443). The notion of *āyah* so ubiquitous in the Qur^ān on the other hand takes in the Qur^ān on the sense of divine sign, respectively verbal (c.f. Q 3:5) and non-verbal (c.f. Q 2:164) divine communication (cf. Izutsu (1964) 2002: 142 ff., 163 f.). Badawi and Abdel Haleem identifies ten aspects on the word *āyah* in the Qur^ān, all connected to divine communications in different ways (Badawi & Abdel Haleem 2008: 68 f.). The word *āyah* may outside of the qur^ānic discourse take on a more general sense of ‘sign’ or ‘message’ (Lane (1877) 1984: 1: 135), as in the Prophetic *ḥadīth* cited below: ‘The signs of the hypocrite are three [...] (*Āyatu l-munāfiqi thalātatun* [...]).’

⁶ Ibrāhīm 2001: 13 f. The position recalls the Saussurian stand on the arbitrariness of language, but it should be noted that any idea of arbitrariness in the case of the Arabic language primarily concerns the root meaning, as there is a degree of semantic determinedness in the morphology.

⁷ In acknowledgement of a contextually conditioned polysemy in the Qur^ān, and in agreement with Abdel Haleem on that in translation ‘ignoring this feature and forcing upon a word a single meaning for the sake

The main body of lexemes in the Arabic lexicon has a semantic content derived from a most commonly tri-radical⁸ root (*uṣūl al-kalimah*) denoting a lexical meaning⁹ in combination with a morphological template (*wazn*, *sīghah* or *bunyah*) denoting a grammatical meaning. In addition, a variety of semantic extensions have developed over time. Lexically compatible words are either cognates (etymologically related, that is developed from a common ancestor) or they belong to a common semantic field without being etymologically related. As Martin R. Zammit points out, lexical compatibility is attested at a synchronic level, whereas cognancy is reflecting a diachronic process, which is not his concern.¹⁰ The diachronic perspective is likewise not a central one to the present analysis. I contend with scholars such as Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) that foreign words have at different stages been incorporated into the Arabic lexicon, but I will take an interest in their genealogy only so far as I find it semantically informing.¹¹

The present study has a synchronic focus and will analyse interrelations between lexical items as they occur at a certain point in history or in a certain text; in case of this article the received qurʾānic text.¹² The stability of this text is expressed in the ʿuthmanic consonantal script and in the aural / oral transmission of the text. On the other hand a degree of historical flexibility of the text is expressed in transmissions of

of consistency results in denial of the context and misrepresentation of the material' (Abdel Haleem 2004: xxx), I nevertheless find it easier to follow the argument in an semantic analysis if either the Arabic term is retained throughout the discussion or a consistent translation of each term is offered. Accordingly, I will in case of the key terms in this article keep to a single translation of each term unless otherwise noted, and I leave the reflections of their different aspects to the analysis.

⁸ Bi- and quadriradical roots are less common.

⁹ I understand 'lexical meaning' as the aspect of meaning given in a lexical entry. Arabic lexicography developed as an offshoot from the *tafsīr* tradition, with Khalīl Ibn Aḥmad's (d. 175/791) *Kitāb al-ʿayn* as the first known dictionary. A semantic relationship between the permutations of a root was already in this dictionary suggested. Later scholars like Ibn Jinnī (d. 392/1002) and Aḥmad Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1005) developed this idea into a full fledged theory about the root meaning that came to be generally accepted, although the latter's dictionary, *Muʿjam maqāyīs al-lughah*, is unique in that he discusses the root meaning explicitly (Ibrāhīm 2001: 169, 180; K. Versteegh (1997) 2001: 76). Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī claims in his *al-Mufradāt fī ḡharīb al-Qurʾān* that there are relations (*munāsabat*) between permutations of a root, but he does not offer a root meaning for the different lemmas (al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt*: 10).

¹⁰ Zammit 2002: 13. Others have however made attempts of tracing the words back to etymons, among them Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) in his *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* (al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*) and *al-Muhadhdhab fī mā waqāʿa fil-Qurʾān min al-muʿarrab*, translated into English in Bell 1924. Although a few more recent works have contested some of his conclusions, Arthur Jeffery's *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān* is still the standard reference (Jeffery 1938; cf. Carter 2006).

¹¹ Jeffery discusses the origin of the noun *īmān*, but does not suggest that the root ²-m-n is anything but genuinely Arabic, while the other roots mainly treated in this article, *w-k-l* and *w-th-q* are not discussed at all (Jeffery 1938: 70). According to Zammit (2002: 79, 427, 441) all three roots are however common to several Semitic languages.

¹² As Angelika Neuwirth observes it has become incumbent for every researcher in the field of qurʾānic studies to state a particular vantage point with regards to the historicity of the text (Neuwirth 2003: 1). Contested views on the historicity of the qurʾānic text, though important to the broader field of qurʾānic studies, are not to be discussed here. Committing myself to a sort of methodological traditionalism, I maintain that 'the point in history' of the qurʾānic text is a stretch of twenty-some-odd years at the beginning of the sixth century AD. A recent discussion founded upon Islamic tradition is presented in al-Azami 2003. Recent ideas more or less critical to the traditional Islamic view are presented in *The Qurʾān as Text* 1996, *The Qurʾān in its Historical Context* 2008, and *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu* 2010.

variant readings of various authenticity, that is canonical or acceptable and non-canonical or non-acceptable readings referred to in the Islamic tradition as respectively *qirāʾāt mutawātirah* and *qirāʾāt shādhah*.¹³

Interpretation

The qurʾānic text lends itself to interpretative activity. With *sūrat Āl ʿImrān* (Q 3:7), where a distinction is drawn between ‘definite’ (*muḥkam*) and ‘ambiguous’ (*mutashābih*)¹⁴ *āyāt*, as a starting point, possibilities and limits in interpretative activity have been discussed extensively in the literature. Al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392) concludes in his *Al-Burhān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* that interpretation, within the proper limits, is a commendable activity.¹⁵ Directions are given in the text on using human reasoning (*ʿaql*) to understand the divine signs (*qad bayyanā la-kumu l-āyāti in kuntum taʿqilūna*; Q 3:118) and to consider the divine signs of the Scripture in a profound way (*kitābun anzalnāhu ilayka mubārakun li-yadabbarū āyātihi*; Q 38:29). Moreover the text establishes a relationship between the concepts of divine signs and *sīmā*: ‘In this there are truly signs (*āyāt*) for one who knows a thing by its outward signs (*al-mutasawwimīn*).’¹⁶ (Q 15:75) There are then divine signs (*āyāt*) for those who know things by their outward signs (*sīmāt*), and the word as a particular phonetic entity is such an outward sign. Consequently, the word is a gateway to the divine sign, which brings to mind cultural theorist and critic Mieke Bal’s suggestion to take the words seriously in the hermeneutic endeavour.¹⁷ The word is a natural and necessary focal point regardless of the individual stand on the ontology of the Qurʾān, as culture studies requires what Michael G. Carter terms ‘a well-developed terminological empathy’.¹⁸

The linguist ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078) held that the reference of the words is not an ontological reality, but an assessment (*ḥukm*) of this reality.¹⁹

¹³ Readings were in the Islamic tradition compiled in works of *tafsīr* as well as in special works, which analyzed and classified them according to their authenticity. A recent overview of the Islamic scholarship on readings is found in al-Imam 2006. In modern scholarship, Arthur Jeffery’s compilation (Jeffery 1937) is a standard reference, although in this work he does not evaluate the readings with regards to probable authenticity. An initiative in the critical study of the qurʾānic text has been launched recently with the Corpus Coranicum project under the direction of Angelika Neuwirth.

¹⁴ *Mutashābih* is itself an ambiguous term and according to Badawi and Abdel Haleem an autoantonym meaning both ‘likeness’ and ‘confusion’ (Badawi & Abdel Haleem 2008: 475; cf. Lane (1877) 1984: 1: 1500). In the context of Q 39:23 it is understood in the sense ‘similarity’, corresponding to the meaning of the technical term *mutashābih al-lafẓī*, ‘semantic relations through similar lexical units’, see below.

¹⁵ Al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān* 2: 205.

¹⁶ Abdel Haleem does not retain the plural of *āyāt* in his translation, and whereas Abdel Haleem (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004) translates *al-mutasawwimīn* as ‘those who can learn’, I follow Penrice ((1969) 2004: 159) in this translation.

¹⁷ Bal 2008: 26 ff.

¹⁸ Carter 2004: 452.

¹⁹ Larkin 1995: 62 f.

Meaning according to this view, is not what resides in a fixed relation between the words and an ontological reality, but a process involving the interpretator. Bal promotes a reading attitude she calls ‘literalism’, in which the interest is taken in the precise wording of a text while the reader is conscious that his or her questions to the text emerges from the interpreter in his or her cultural framework, not from the text itself.²⁰ Interpretation is an ongoing activity, and although it is informed by tradition it is marked by a certain temporality.²¹ In this way the open-endedness of the text is preserved although the canonicity of the text is stable,²² and the interpretative activity provides a linguistically founded flexibility.

Coherence in the qurʾānic text

The second basic assumption of my analysis is that the Qurʾān can be read and studied as a structurally and semantically coherent unit.²³ In this regard my reading will be informed by the following concepts framed within Islamic exegetical and linguistic traditions: linear connections (*munāsabāt*), micro-level significant composition (*naẓm*), and semantic relations through similar lexical units (*al-mutashābih al-lafẓī*) and aspects of meaning (*al-wujūh wal-naẓāʾir*).

²⁰ Bal contrasts this reading attitude to a fundamentalist reading attitude which according to her is ‘the reading posture that rigidifies the word-meaning, or signifier-signified unity, but also, dangerously, fixes it to a prescriptive referent’ (Bal 2008: 49).

²¹ Bal refers to the American semiologist Charles Sander Peirce’s view of the temporality of semiosis with which ‘signs can do their work of signification without having to be split in signifier and signified’ (Bal 2008: 139).

²² Bal 2008: 4 f.

²³ I use coherence here ‘semi-technically of the way in which the content of connected speech or text hangs together’ (Matthews 2007). The perception of the Qurʾān as a disjointed text has been prevailing in Western scholarship since the Middle Ages. Reynold A. Nicholson maintained that ‘the opinion almost unanimously held by European readers [is] that it is obscure, tiresome, uninteresting’ due to its alleged disjointedness and ‘preposterous arrangement’ (Nicholson (1907) 1995: 161). It may be noted that Mieke Bal suggests a more positive reading of the term preposterous, seeing it as ‘a literal turning upside down of the order of time: pre- becomes post- and vice versa. Any exegesis, then is preposterous by definition, and no appeal to the “original text” can change that.’ Bal argues that ‘this preposterousness is necessary as an antidote against the infusion in the alleged textual basis of exegesis of other people’s memories, just as personal, unexamined, and “doxic” as mine’ (Bal 2008: 13). The idea of the Qurʾān as a disjointed text reached a notorious peak in Richard Bell’s translation (*The Qurʾān*: Translated with a critical re-arrangement of the Surahs by Richard Bell, Edinburgh 1937–39: Clark), described as ‘a work almost pathological in its dissection and dismemberment of the Holy Book’ (Montgomery 2006: 40). Apparently one of the first challenges by a Western scholar to this prevalent idea came in an article by Richard M. Frank where he demonstrated textual coherence within the unit of the *sūrah* through an analysis of *sūrat al-Munāfiqīn* (63) (Frank 1961). In the past few decades a number of studies have appeared highlighting theoretically and empirically coherence of the qurʾānic text in its textual order as acknowledged by the *mufṣṣirūn* as well as modern interpreters. See examples with a variety of approaches in Mir 1986; Robinson (1996) 2003; Abdul-Raof 2005; al-ʿAwwa (El-Awa) 2005; Neuwirth (1981) 2007; Cuypers 2007 (English translation: Cuypers (2007) 2009).

Of the very first subjects al-Zarkashī discusses in his *al-Burhān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* is the concept of *munāsabāt*,²⁴ explained as:

what connects between them [the *āyāt*] generally or specifically, rationally, sensory or imaginarily or other types of connections or logical inferences such as cause and effect, or synonyms (*naẓarayn*) or autoantonyms (*ḍiddayn*) or the likes of it, or the external necessities such as what is ordered in accordance with the order of the factual reality in the predicament.²⁵

The connections between *āyāt* may be obvious or not obvious; in the latter case they need to be explained by some kind of textual indicator (*qarīnah*).²⁶ The *munāsabāt* are perceived as a source of meaning as well as of stylistics.²⁷ Al-Zarkashī is quoting Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) on his opinion that: ‘Most of the subtleties of the Qurʾān is lodged in the order and connections.’²⁸ Consequently, al-Zarkashī recommends a thorough research of the immediate textual context as a necessary initial phase to any analysis.²⁹

Within studies of the Qurʾānic eloquence (*balāghah*) coherence takes on a specific meaning. In al-Jurjānī’s understanding, the grammatical relationship between words (*naẓm*) is what creates meaning. Coherence (*naẓm*) is in his view achieved through the means of grammar, which in itself carries potential meaning (*maʿānī al-naḥw*).³⁰ In Hussein Abdul-Raof’s view this form of coherence boils down to word order.³¹ Al-Jurjānī and other scholars in this tradition had their main focus on establishing the Qurʾānic *ʿijāz* (‘inimitability’), but their ideas were also influential on methodologies for reading and interpreting the text, as is exemplified in the *tafsīr* literature.³²

Finally, scholars have argued that coherence of the Qurʾānic text may be identified by way of a study of the semantics of the Qurʾānic vocabulary. According to the linguist Aḥmād Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1005) coherence (*naẓm*) is expressed in the various ways that a passage in a *sūrah* connects to another passage in another *sūrah* by

²⁴ A literal translation of the term *munāsabah* may be ‘suitability’ which retains the same double meaning of ‘sequence’ and ‘suitability’.

²⁵ Al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān* 1: 131.

²⁶ Al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān* 1: 143.

²⁷ Abdul-Raof translates *munāsabah* as ‘consonance’ and is analyzing micro-level inter- and intra-sentential consonance as well as macro-level textual analysis focusing on conceptual chaining and intertextuality within and between *suwar* (Abdul-Raof 2005: 25). Abdul-Raof’s endeavour is however not an exegetical one, but a purely linguistic analysis which according to Halliday and Hasan is ‘not an interpretation of what the text means; it is an explanation of why and how it means what it does. Similarly, to the extent that linguistic analysis is concerned with evaluation, a linguistic analysis of a text is not an evaluation of that text; it is an explanation of how and why it is valued as it is. A linguistic analysis of a literary text aims at explaining the interpretation and evaluation that are put upon the text’ (Halliday & Hasan (1976) 1979: 328).

²⁸ Cited in al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān* 1: 132: *aktharu laṭāʾifi l-qurʾāni mawḍaʿatun fil-tartībātī wal-rawābiṭī*. This stand is founded upon the premise that ‘the order of the *suwar* and *āyāt* is put down [by revelation] (*murattabatū suwarihi kullīhi wa-āyātihi bil-tawfīqī*)’ and that ‘the style and splendid order of the text being part of its clear *ʿijāz* (*wa-mīna l-muʿjāzī l-bayyini uslūbihi wa-naẓamihi l-bāhiri*)’, with reference to Q 11:1 (al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān* 1: 133).

²⁹ Al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān* 1: 133.

³⁰ Al-Jurjānī, *Dalāʾil al-ʿijāz*: 254, 336; cf. Kamal (2006: 108), who compares his idea to the Hallidayian theory of meaning.

³¹ Abdul-Raof 2006: 97, and *passim*.

³² Mir 1986: 15 f.

sharing a common word.³³ The existence of homonymous polysemic words (*mushtarak*) was considered an intrinsic trait of the Arabic language by early scholars.³⁴ The polysemic nature of the Qurʾānic vocabulary is duly noted in the *tafsīr* literature, and discussions of a contextually situated semantics are prevalent.³⁵ Al-Zarkashī discusses under the heading *al-mutashābih* (*al-laḥẓī*) how an identical or similar lexical unit may take on different nuances of meanings dependent on their individual textual environment and a host of different grammatical and stylistic features, thus providing internal structures on the level of form as well as meaning.³⁶

In a distinct lexicographical genre developing from the *tafsīr* literature these aspects of meaning of particular lexical items within the Qurʾānic text were collected and discussed. In this genre, commonly called *al-wujūh wal-naẓāʾir*,³⁷ the two fields of interests are combined, and semantic structures within the Qurʾānic discourse are highlighted. The earliest extant work in the genre of *al-wujūh wal-naẓāʾir* is that of

³³ Ibn Fāris, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*: 183 f.

³⁴ Bettini 2008: 320. Homonymous words have two or more non-related senses, whereas polysemic words have two or more related senses. In the second case the question is raised whether the different senses are going back to a common (root) meaning, in the case of homonymy the question is whether the words are derived from different roots. The existence of homonymous polysemic words is accepted as a trait of the language, and compilations and identification of the meanings were recorded in the lexicographical works as well as discussed in the literature of legal hermeneutics. The legal theorists (*al-uṣūliyyūn*) took ‘care to exclude from their definitions the possibility to consider a word *muṣṭarak*, if its two (or more) meanings comprise one proper meaning and in addition metaphorical ones, or if they do not refer to entities that differ in themselves’ (Bettini 2008: 322).

³⁵ Several scholars have observed possible semantic developments within the Qurʾānic vocabulary. Izutsu ((1964) 2002: 35) attested that ‘since Theodor Nöldeke published his epoch-making view on the matter, many important discoveries have been made regarding the “history” of the Qurʾānic vocabulary, which have made it clear that the language of Revelation underwent a profound change semantically after the Prophet’s migration to Mādīnah.’ One recent example is found in Oehlander 2005. In the present study my focus will not be on polysemy of the text in historical terms, contending with Izutsu ((1964) 2002: 35) that ‘we may also treat the Qurʾānic vocabulary as a whole as a static system’.

³⁶ Al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān* 1: 207 ff. Al-Zarkashī includes in his various repertoires not only identical lexemes but also cognates such as *naẓal* and *naẓala*.

³⁷ Al-Ṣuyūfī, *al-Itqān* 1: 445. Following A. J. Arberry (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Arberry] 1964), *wujūh* and *naẓāʾir* have been translated as respectively polysemy/homonymy and synonymy (Berg 2004). To my understanding this is not a completely precise translation. The *wujūh* refers to the various meanings of a particular lexical item, which may be explained as polysemy/homonymy, although in my view ‘aspects of meaning’, though less technical is a more valid translation as we are not only dealing here with lexical polysemy/homonymy, but with interpretation of words in specific contexts. In the literature of *ulūm al-Qurʾān* the word *wujūh* also refers to levels of meaning, that is alternative interpretations of one passage, often on the basis of a literal (*ḥaqīqī*) vs. a metaphorical (*majāzī*) reading. Ibn al-ʿImād seems to understand the term *wujūh* in the broad sense encompassing both contextually defined aspects of meaning in one lexical item or expression in different contexts and levels of meanings in a textual unit. He is referring to a *ḥadīth* from the Prophet where he says ‘Nobody will have a thorough understanding unless he sees many aspects in the Qurʾān (*lā yakūnu l-rajulu faqīhan kulla l-fiqhi ḥattā yarā lil-Qurʾāni wujūhan kathīran*)’ (Ibn al-ʿImād, *Kaṣḥf al-sarāʾir*: 4; cf. al-Namarī al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmiʿ bayān al-ʿilm*: 98, where the *ḥadīth* is reported on the authority of Shidād Ibn Aws, d. 58/677). Nevertheless when analysing different aspects of a word Ibn al-ʿImād resorts to citing different Qurʾānic passages and hence confining himself to the first meaning of *wujūh*. *Al-Naẓāʾir* on the other hand, does not in the *wujūh* and *naẓāʾir*-literature refer to synonyms, but to the lexical items distributed throughout the text, which normally are identical, but which may be cognate (i.e. active and passive form of a verb, noun and derived participle). The *wujūh* are thus the meanings and the *naẓāʾir* are the lexical items.

Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān al-Balkhī (d. 150/767).³⁸ Later scholars who wrote in this genre include al-^cAskarī (d. ca. 400/1010), al-Dāmaghānī (d. 478/1085), Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), and Ibn al-^cImād (d. 887/1482).³⁹ Moreover, lexicographical works provide useful information about the semantics of the qur²ānic vocabulary, notably *Al-Mufradāt fī gharīb al-Qur²ān* of al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. early 5th/11th century),⁴⁰ as well as general dictionaries such as Ibn Fāris's *Mu^cjam maqāyīs al-lughah*⁴¹ and the celebrated Ibn Manẓūr's (d. 711/1311) *Lisān al-^carab*.⁴²

The analysis to be undertaken here will be inspired by these historical insights and methods, as well as those of some modern studies. The simultaneous stability and flux of the qur²ānic text with the interpretative traditions creates a space of semiosis, a broad universe of meaning, i.e. something similar to what the Russian semiotician Yuri M. Lotman referred to as a semiosphere where a heterogenic tradition of meaning and cultural memory is condensed in particular texts.⁴³ I will offer interpretations of qur²ānic concepts of the covenant in view of the immediate and surrounding textual contexts, in addition to drawing on the extra-textual linguistic and historical contexts attested to in the interpretative traditions.⁴⁴ My reading will be situated within the framework of moral discourse.

³⁸ Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān, *al-Wujūh*; cf. al-^cAwwā 1998: 19. See also Abdus Sattar 1978.

³⁹ Al-^cAskarī, *Taṣṣīḥ*; al-Dāmaghānī, *al-Wujūh*; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Nuzhat*; Ibn al-^cImād, *Kashf al-sarā'ir*. Although these authors lived in different periods and came from different traditions, the material contained in these sources is in many cases identical. This suggests that they all draw on the same sources in the *tafsīr* literature or possibly on earlier books in the *wujūh wal-naẓā'ir* genre. Abū Hilāl al-^cAskarī was a linguist and literary critic of Persian origin. Without mentioning any predecessors by name, he claims that he in his book is correcting some misinterpretations in the books of *wujūh* and *naẓā'ir* written by sympathisers of the *mu'tazilī* school of thought (al-^cAskarī, *Taṣṣīḥ*: 25: *fīhā ta'wīlātun taṭrudu 'alā uṣūli ahli l-ḥaqqi minā l-qā'ilīna bil-tawḥīdi wal-^cadli*). The *ḥanaṭī faqīh* Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Dāmaghānī who served as a *qāḍī al-quḍāt* in Baghdad over 30 years, states that his book is an extension to the works of Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān and others (al-Dāmaghānī, *al-Wujūh*: 37). Jamāl al-Dīn Abī al-Faraj 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn 'Alī Ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Jawzī was a *ḥanbalī* scholar of jurisprudence who also wrote extensively on a number of other subjects. He is referring to a number of earlier scholars including al-Kalbī, Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān and al-Dāmaghānī. His book is a collection of what he found to be the most outstanding in the preceding traditions (*jama' tu fī kitābi ḥadhā ajwadu mā jam' uhu*) (Ibn al-Jawzī, *Nuzhat*: 11 f.). Ibn al-^cImād is referring to books of *tafsīr* and *lughah* generally (Ibn al-^cImād, *Kashf al-sarā'ir*: 47).

⁴⁰ Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt*. In spite of its title, al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī's book is more of a general dictionary of the qur²ānic vocabulary.

⁴¹ Ibn Fāris's dictionary, based among others on Khalīl Ibn Aḥmad's *Kitān al-^cayn*, is with its six volumes in print not among the most comprehensive dictionaries. Nevertheless it is outstanding in the Arabic lexicographical tradition in that its explicit aim is to identify one or two primary root meanings (Ibn Fāris, *Mu^cjam*; cf. Ibrāhīm 2001: 180; Seidensticker 2008: 36 f.). Badawi and Abdel Haleem's dictionary from 2008 is a rare example of a bilingual dictionary giving root meanings, where more commonly the first entry under the root is the *f-^c-l* form I verbal meaning. However Badawi and Abdel Haleem do not define a single primary root meaning, but an 'inventory of the basic concepts covered by the root is provided in an attempt to show the range of semantic scatter it compasses' (Badawi & Abdel Haleem 2008: xix f.).

⁴² Ibn Manẓūr's dictionary, based on al-Jawharī's (d. 400/1009) *Tāj al-lughah wa-ṣiḥāḥ al-^carabiyyah* and other works, accumulates a significant part of the lexicographical literature up to his time (Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*; cf. Ibrāhīm 2001: 191).

⁴³ Lotman (1973) 2001: 18.

⁴⁴ Herbert Berg points to the problem of whether 'the polysemes discovered by the exegetes are deliberate or merely imposed upon the Qur²ān for theological or other reasons' (Berg 2004: 155). Since most, if not all of the philological activities were raised and developed in the wake of the Qur²ān and with the aim to explain it, both confirming and falsifying Berg's statement will prove difficult. This may be a dilemma of

Moral discourse in the Qurʾān

The late Japanese scholar Toshihiko Izutsu (d. 1993) distinguishes in his book *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qurʾān* different layers of moral discourse or categories of ethical concepts in the Qurʾān.⁴⁵ The first discourse is what Izutsu terms divine ethics, which is composed of the most beautiful names of God (*al-asmā al-ḥusnā*). This is a group of concepts in the Qurʾān describing particular aspects of God, or the ethical nature of God. The second discourse Izutsu identifies is described as ethico-religious concepts. These are concepts underlying the normative demands on the human being to take up certain attitudes towards God and to act in specific ways ‘in accordance with God’s commands and prohibitions,’ thus being ‘both ethical and religious demands’.⁴⁶ Finally Izutsu identifies a third moral discourse of social ethics, made up by concepts and regulations which in the qurʾānic text sometimes are given in the form of normative statements and sometimes in more general form, and which in the post-qurʾānic period were to be developed into the system of Islamic jurisprudence.⁴⁷

There are degrees of coincidence between these different discourses. The ethical attitudes laid out in the Qurʾān towards fellow creatures on earth will have a religious basis in as much as they are divinely guided. Notions and concepts might on the other hand be working simultaneously at more than one level. Izutsu acknowledges that the three discourses are closely related, as the

image of God pervades the whole of it, and nothing escapes His knowledge and providence. Semantically this means that, in general, no major concept in the Qurʾān exists quite independently of the concept of God and that in the sphere of human ethics each one of its key concepts is but a pale reflection—or a very imperfect imitation—of the divine nature itself, or refers to a particular response elicited by divine actions.⁴⁸

With regards to the discourse of social ethics, Izutsu somehow limits it, namely to a social ethics that ‘relates to the basic attitude of a man to his brethren living in the same community’,⁴⁹ whereas as we will see the qurʾānic social ethics addresses relations both to human beings within and outside of one’s own community. Notwithstanding this critical remark I find Izutsu’s exposition of the three discourses a useful framework for my own discussion of the fields and functions of the covenant.

any analysis of this kind, as it is indeed in hermeneutic activities in general. In the analyses of Izutsu for instance one may point to a degree of circularity, in as much as the researcher to some extent builds his analysis of the qurʾānic ontology on a prior understanding of the culture which on the other hand is necessary to be able to pinpoint what particular notions to include in his semantic mapping. In addition, Umberto Eco warns against attaching a too high grade of definiteness to this kind of analysis, with a specific reference to a structural semantic analysis of the Qurʾān (Eco 1979: 84). These are all pitfalls to be aware of even in this kind of non-theologically normative analysis.

⁴⁵ Izutsu (1959) 1966: 17.

⁴⁶ Izutsu (1959) 1966: 17.

⁴⁷ Izutsu (1959) 1966: 18.

⁴⁸ Izutsu (1959) 1966: 18.

⁴⁹ Izutsu (1959) 1966: 17.

The covenant—*al-mīthāq*

Although there are those who claim that the notion of the '[c]ovenant remained at most a minor chord in Islamic thought, but no more,'⁵⁰ others have observed the constituting function of the covenant between God and man in Islamic theology and jurisprudence. Izutsu holds that 'practically all the moral values that developed in Islām may be said to have something to do with the covenant-idea, directly or at least indirectly'.⁵¹ Bernard G. Weiss notes that law is particularly rooted in the conception of the covenant although it seems not to have been 'a subject on which Muslim authors deemed it necessary to write comprehensive and systematic treaties.'⁵² The idea remains an implicit premise, rather than an explicit theme attracting scholarly attention.⁵³

In modern scholarly literature, the divine covenant has been put forward as a central concept in Islamic thought generally and in the Qur^ʾān specifically.⁵⁴ Robert Carter Darnell's study from 1970 shows that the text is imbued with the covenant idea, identifying more than 700 *āyāt* related to it.⁵⁵ Rosalind Ward Gwynne suggests that the covenant-idea is intrinsic to the qur^ʾānic message,⁵⁶ and she argues that it is pervading the qur^ʾānic argument: 'The relation between God and humanity is called the Covenant, and in my view it is the logical key to the entire structure of qur^ʾānic argument. Virtually every argument in the Qur^ʾān expresses or implies one or more of the convental provisions.'⁵⁷ Moreover, the covenant is according to Gwynne 'the

⁵⁰ Elazar 1996: 357. Although his statement is general, it is probably conditioned by Elazar's understanding of the covenant in a narrow sense as 'formation of a political order through consent as manifested in a pact or an appropriate level of mutual binding' (Elazar 1996: 3). Based on this Elazar claims that while there was no previous relevant tradition among the peoples of Islām, the covenantal dimension of Islām itself was too ambiguous to impress any lasting institutionalised form. There are however examples of the opposite. On the constitutional and legal implications of the covenant in al-Ṭabarī's thought, see Mårtensson 2010: 48 f.

⁵¹ Izutsu (1959) 1966: 89.

⁵² Weiss 1990: 50, footnote 2.

⁵³ An important exception to this is the *ṣūfī* traditions where the divine covenant is a current topic. In a *risālah* that has come to be known as *Kitāb al-mīthāq*, Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 298/910) integrates the divine covenant with his teachings on *tawhīd*, taking the human acceptance of the covenant (*balā shahidnā*) in Q 7:172 as his point of departure. The final stage of *tawhīd*, 'unification', is when the worshipper returns to the primordial stage in which he was in when God took the original covenant from him (al-Junayd, *Kitāb al-mīthāq*: 41; cf. Abdel-Kader 1962: 76 ff.). Within this scheme the covenant is seen as the state of return to God, whereas the *ṣūfī* concept of 'oblivion', *fanā*, is described as the method to attain this state. *Baqā*, 'the abiding and continuing in God', is referring to the same state as *fanā*, but from the aspect of remaining in God. Even in this state the human being, in his purely spiritual, primary existence, is however not identical with God. He has given up his worldly individuality, but has not been able to merge into God. Only in this state can God be seen, but the human spirit still cannot comprehend the full reality of God (Abdel-Kader 1962: 81 f.). In other words there is still a relationship of otherness, and hence a *mīthāq* between God and man.

⁵⁴ Notably in Darnell 1970; Weiss 1990; Gwynne 2004; Mårtensson 2008.

⁵⁵ Darnell 1970. Darnell examines the covenant idea in the Qur^ʾān from four perspectives: the pre-qur^ʾānic historical covenant of Banū Isrāʾīl, the contemporary religio-political *bayʿ* of the believers to the Prophet Muḥammad, the responsibility put upon the prophets to convey the divine message and the ethically based differentiation between trustworthy people and hypocrites.

⁵⁶ Gwynne 2004: 4.

⁵⁷ Gwynne 2004: 1.

unshakable basis for the structure of moral reasoning that God requires of human beings.⁵⁸

In the Qurʾān *al-mīthāq* refers to the divine covenant, of which different accounts, or rather accounts of the different stages and expressions of the covenant, is distributed throughout the qurʾānic text: God made a covenant with man (Q 57:8; 2:27), with the prophets (Q 3:81; 33:7), with Banū Isrāʾīl (Q 2:63, 83, 93; 5:12–14, 70), with *ahl al-kitāb* (Q 3:187; 4:154 f.; 7:169) and with the believers (Q 5:7). To this divine covenant I will return shortly. However, the notion of *mīthāq* serves mundane functions as well.

Inter-human covenants

The notion of *mīthāq* refers in the Qurʾān *inter alia* to inter-human, mundane contracts or treaties, such as a peace treaty or a political alliance agreement (Q 4:90, 92; 8:72), or a marital covenant (Q 4:20 f.). Marriage, which will here serve a case in point, is thus described as a solemn covenant (*mīthāqān ghalīẓan*) sealed with a non-returnable bride-gift (*qinṭār*). In the case of divorce, taking back the bride-gift is described as a disgraceful and sinful act: ‘Will you take it disgracefully⁵⁹ and a blatant sin? How could you take it when you have lain with each other and they have taken [pl. fem.] a solemn covenant⁶⁰ from you [pl. masc.] (*a-taʾkhudhūnahu buhtānan wa-ithman mubīnan wa-kayfa taʾkhudhūnahu wa-qad afdā baʿḍukum ilā baʿḍin wa-akhadhna minkum mīthāqān ghalīẓan*)?’ (Q 4:20 f.)

The marriage relationship is thus, beyond its legal, contractual frame, based upon a moral commitment on the parties to respect the terms of the contract. The antithesis of such a commitment is expressed in the concept of *nushūz*, ‘marital discord’; in Q 4:34 on the part of the woman and in 4:128 on the part of the man. According to Ibn Fāris the root meaning of *n-sh-z* is ‘elevation’ (*irtifāʿ*) and ‘highness’ (*ʿulūw*), and by extension ‘to dishonour’, and so ‘it is said that a woman elevates herself above the husband meaning she becomes obstinate towards the husband, and likewise the man elevates himself above her meaning he shuns her and beats her.’⁶¹ In both *āyahs* Q 4:34 and 4:128 what brings about the conflict is the fear (*khawf*) on one part that the

⁵⁸ Gwynne 2004: 24.

⁵⁹ Abdel Haleem (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004) translates *buhtānan* as ‘when it is unjust’, which I find to be more interpretative than ‘disgracefully’. Square brackets indicating gender and number are included by me.

⁶⁰ Abdel Haleem (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004) uses the terms ‘pledge’ and ‘covenant’ interchangeably for both *mīthāq* and *ʿahd*. Although I will refer to the divine covenant as ‘covenant’ regardless of what terminology is used in the text, when citing the Qurʾān I will reserve the term covenant for *mīthāq* and pledge for *ʿahd*.

⁶¹ Ibn Fāris, *Muʿjam* 5: 430 f.: *fa-qīla nasharati l-marʾatu: istaṣbat ʿalā baʿliḥā, wa-kadhālika nashara baʿluḥā: jafāḥā wa-ḍarabāḥā*. Abdel Haleem (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004) translates *nushūz* in both *āyahs* with ‘high-handedness’, which is in accordance with a lexical sense of the word (*The Qurʾān* 2004: 54, footnote a.; cf. Lane (1877) 1984: 2: 2795; al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt*: 495).

other part should in this way violate the covenantal commitment. When the husband fears that his wife should commit *nushūz* towards him he fears according to the *tafsīr* of al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) that she ‘opposes him and has no confidence in him’.⁶² Al-Zamakhsharī emphasises the woman’s duty to protect ‘God’s right and God’s trust’, which is chastity, safeguarding, apprehensiveness towards men and sincerity with them, thereby grounding the marriage in the divine covenant.⁶³ When on the other hand the wife fears that the husband should commit *nushūz* towards her it is explained as a fear that he should ‘withdraw from her in refusing her himself, his material sustenance and the mercy that is between the man and the woman, or that he should hurt her with insults or abuse and avoidance.’⁶⁴ Although this fear materialises in different ways and can result in different kinds of consequences,⁶⁵ I would argue that a common denominator here is weakened trust.

The element of mutual trust entailed in marriage as a moral commitment-covenant can be further accounted for in the etymology of the word *mīthāq*. Ibn Fāris notes in his dictionary that the *mīthāq* is ‘a firm pledge which is trust’.⁶⁶ Indeed one of the most widespread notions of trust in daily language, as well as a technical term in *‘ulūm al-ḥadīth*, though not occurring in the qur’ānic vocabulary, is another derivate from the same root, namely the *maṣḍar thiqaḥ*, ‘trust’. Al-Zamakhsharī equates *al-‘urwatu l-wuthqā* with *al-ḥabl al-wathīq*, which according to him here is a parable for rational knowledge and empirical reasoning.⁶⁷ On the other hand *al-ḥabl al-wathīq* is given as a gloss to *ḥablu llāhi* in Q 3:103, where al-Zamakhsharī gives ‘His covenant’ (*‘ahdihī*) as one interpretational option.⁶⁸

A contractual relationship may be morally grounded in one or more parties explicitly claiming God as their trustee. This idea is expressed in the narrative of *sūrat Yūsuf*. The father, Ya‘qūb, has lost his son Yūsuf after having entrusted him to his brother’s care. Still in pain from the loss he asks how he can entrust another son to his brothers (*hal amanukum ‘alayhi illā kamā amintukum ‘alā akhīhi min qabli*; Q 12:64), but decides to give them permission to bring him with them on condition that they conclude an agreement on the matter in the name of God (*ḥattā tu‘tūna mawthiqan*⁶⁹ *mina llāhi*; Q 12:66) that they will bring him back unless they are themselves attacked. When they at an earlier stage of the narrative had taken Yūsuf

⁶² Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashaf* 1: 496, regarding 4: 34: *nushūzuḥā wa-nushūsuḥā an f’aṣṭi zawjahā wa-lā tatma’in ilayhi*.

⁶³ Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashaf* 1: 496: *ḥafīḍatun lil-ghaybi bi-mā ḥafīḍa llāh ayy ḥafīḍatun lil-ghaybi bil-amri l-ladhī yaḥfaḍu ḥaqqu llāhi wa-amānatu llāh wa-huwa al-ta’affu wal-taḥaṣṣunu wal-shafaqatu ‘ala l-rijālī wal-naṣīḥatu la-hum*.

⁶⁴ Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashaf* 1: 559, regarding 4: 128: *wal-nushūz an tatajāfā ‘anhā bi-an yamn’ahā nafsahu wa-naḥaḥatū l-mawaddati wal-rahmati l-lati bayna l-rajulī wal-mar’ati wa-an yu’dhīhā bi-sabbin aw ḍarbin wal-īrād*.

⁶⁵ The fear also results in different kinds of possible actions. In recent literature *nushūz* has been discussed within the framework of the question of marital conflict and domestic violence (see Shaikh 1997; Roald 2001; Marín 2003; Mubarak 2004).

⁶⁶ Ibn Fāris, *Mu‘jam* 6: 85: *al-‘ahdu al-muḥkamu wa-huwa thiqaṭun*.

⁶⁷ Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashaf* 1: 299.

⁶⁸ Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashaf* 1: 386.

⁶⁹ *Mawthiq* is a *maṣḍar* of *w-th-q*. Abdel Haleem (*The Qur’ān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004) translates the phrase ‘unless you swear by God’, which points to a specific act associated with concluding an agreement.

along with them the first time around, Yaʿqūb had not demanded such an agreement. The brothers had simply asked to be entrusted the brother and Yaʿqūb had accepted (Q 12:11). Now Yaʿqūb ‘instrumentalises’ the trust between them by way of a covenant (*mawthiq*), taking God as *wakīl*, ‘witness’ or ‘trustee’ (*qāla llāhu ʿalā mā naqūlu wakīlun*; Q 12:66). The element of trust is here not only mutual between the parties of the agreement, but between both parties and a third party, God. I would see this as an instance of intersecting discourses, where social and religious ethics are neatly tied together.

Trusting God—*tawakkul*

The root of the participle *wakīl* is *w-k-l*, which according to Ibn Fāris has the root meaning ‘relying on someone else for your matter’.⁷⁰ The lexical meaning of the verb *wakala* is according to the dictionary *Lisān al-ʿarab* ‘leaving something to someone’, that ‘someone’ is taking responsibility for the ‘something’.⁷¹ The *wakīl* has in the qurʾānic text, according to Muqātil and later authors in the *wujūh*-genre, four aspects, of which the first three are ‘protector’ (*hīrzan wa-mānīʿan*;⁷² Q 4:109; 17:65), ‘lord’ (*rabb*;⁷³ Q 73:9; 17:2) and ‘witness’ (*shahīd*; Q 4:81, 171; 11:12).⁷⁴ In these *āyāt* God is the absolute protector, lord and witness, or holder of an all-compassing trusteeship. However, in the *āyāt* where *wakīl* takes on the fourth meaning, of guardian (*musaytir*; Q 42:6; 6:66),⁷⁵ the term occurs in a negating function as the text emphasises the impossibility that a human being, even the Prophet, should be the *wakīl* for anyone. *Wakīl* in the sense of holder of a limited trusteeship is thus not a qurʾānic notion. God is in the Qurʾān the only *wakīl* in the absolute sense, just as the qurʾānic concept of *tawakkul* is reserved for God.⁷⁶

Tawakkul, a *maṣdar* derived from the same root, means ‘to turn to someone’ (*tawallaytu la-hu*) and ‘to rely on someone’ (*ʿtamadtuhu*).⁷⁷ This entails both realising one’s own incapability and subsequently relying on someone else.⁷⁸ In the Qurʾān a most intimate relationship is established between belief in God and trust in Him, as in the repeated expression ‘let the believers put their trust in God (*wa-ʿalā llāhi fal-yatawakkali l-muʾminīna*)’ (Q 5:11; 9:51; 14:11, 58:10; 64:13). Moreover, in

⁷⁰ Ibn Fāris, *Muʿjam* 6: 136: *ʿtimādu ghayrika fī amrika*.

⁷¹ Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān* 11: 734; cf. translations in Lane (1877) 1984, 2: 3059.

⁷² Corresponding to Ibn al-Anbārī’s (d. 577/1181) gloss of *wakīl* as *ḥāfiẓ*; cf. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān* 11: 734.

⁷³ Cf. al-Farrā’s (d. 207/822) gloss on *wakīl* referred in *Lisān al-ʿarab*: *rabb* (Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān* 11: 734).

⁷⁴ Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān, *al-Wujūh*: 45 f.; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Nuzhat*: 294 f.; al-ʿAskarī, *Taṣṣīḥ*: 498–490; Ibn al-ʿImād, *Kashf al-sarāʾir*: 215 f.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ At later stages in the semantic development *tawakkul* retains primarily this qurʾānic sense, but *wakīl* gains a much wider application, such as the common semantic content ‘legal guardian’.

⁷⁷ Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, *al-Mufradāt*: 546.

⁷⁸ Ibn Fāris, *Muʿjam* 6: 136: *iḥāru l-ʿajazī fil-amri wal-ʿtimādu ʿalā ghayrika*.

Q 42:36–39 belief as well as *tawakkul* is strongly linked to cultivating one's virtues and actively taking charge of one's own life:⁷⁹

What you have been given is only the fleeting enjoyment of this world. Far better and more lasting is what God will give to those who believe and trust their Lord; who shun great sins and gross indecencies; who forgive when they are angry; respond to their Lord and keep up the prayer; conduct their affairs by mutual consultation; give to others out of what we have provided for them; and defend themselves when they are oppressed. (Q 42:36–39)

Moral philosopher Annette Baier compares trust in God with infant trust, a form of innate trust that precedes any form of contractual, negotiated trust.⁸⁰ This basic trust⁸¹ is the unchosen, automatic, unconscious trust between infant and parent at its best.⁸² The image of infant trust is known from the Islamic tradition. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) discusses three states or degrees of *tawakkul* in his *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, where the first state is similar to trusting a legal guardian (*wakīl*), the second state is like an infant with his mother, and the third state, and highest degree of *tawakkul* is when the believer is like a deceased in the hands of the washer.⁸³

On the other hand understanding the Qur'ānic conception of trusting God not as an instant of basic trust, but of deliberate commitment may elucidate the somehow elusive expression 'let whoever trusts trust Him (*wa-^calayhi fa-yatawakkali l-mutawakkilūna*)'⁸⁴ (Q 12:67). Whoever is prone to trusting should make sure to put this ultimate trust in the only one who deserves such a trust. Likewise *tawakkul* may in the Qur'ānic discourse be connected to a specific sort of contractual relationship; to the covenant between God and man. I would suggest that this connection is made explicit in a passage where the believers are reminded of the covenant (*mīthāq*) they were offered and accepted, whereupon they are enjoined to perform good deeds in worship as well as in their social interaction while being mindful of God, faithful to Him and trusting Him:

Remember God's blessing on you and His covenant with which you were bound (*wāthaqakum bi-hi*⁸⁵) when you said, 'We hear and we obey.' Be mindful (*wa-ttaqu llāha*⁸⁶) of God: God has full knowledge of the secrets of the heart. You who believe, be

⁷⁹ The topic of trusting God has raised the question of whether acting is lack of trust. In *ṣūfī* writings tensions between the virtue of earning a living and the virtue of complete trust in God appeared for instance as a major motive. Benedikt Reinert has documented discussions in *ṣūfī* literature on questions such as whether to take provisions when travelling, whether to take medicine when sick, or whether to provide for ones family when travelling (Reinert 1968).

⁸⁰ Baier 1986: 241.

⁸¹ The term 'basic trust' was coined by Erik H. Erikson (cf. Erikson 1950: 219 ff.).

⁸² Baier 1986: 245.

⁸³ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* 5: 137 f.; cf. al-Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*: 58 f.

⁸⁴ Abdel Haleem (*The Qur'an* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004) translates the expression more idiomatically 'let everyone put their trust in Him'; see also a similar expression in Q 14:12.

⁸⁵ The verb *wāthaqa* is a *fā'ala* (form III) from the same root as *mīthāq*, *w-th-q*, with the semantic value to attempt to perform the act upon an object (Wright (1874) 1981, 1: 32f.), translated 'to bind someone to oneself, to exchange pledges with' (Badawi & Abdel Haleem 2008: 1010).

⁸⁶ The verb *ittaqa* is derived from the root *w-q-y* with the root meaning 'to protect something from something by means of something else' (Ibn Fāris, *Mu'jam* 6: 131: *ḍaf' shay'un^c an shay'in bi-ghayrihi*). According to E.W. Lane 'its explanations in relation to religion are many and various, but are all resolvable into fear of God, or of sin; or the preservation, or guarding, of oneself from sin' (Lane (1877) 1984, 1: 310; cf. 2:3059). Izutsu refers to pre-Islamic poetry in which the term meant 'self-defence by means of

steadfast in your devotion to God and bear witness impartially: do not let hatred of others lead you away from justice, but adhere to justice, for that is closer to awareness of God. Be mindful of God: God is well aware of all that you do. God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward to those who have faith and do good works; those who reject faith and deny Our revelations will inhabit the blazing Fire. You who believe, remember God's blessing on you when a certain people were about to raise their hands against you and He restrained them. Be mindful of God: let the believers put their trust in Him. (Q 5:7–11)

Human covenants—divine covenants

In some instances the Qurʾānic text is ambiguous as to whether it is referring to a covenant between God and humans or an inter-human covenant. The covenant made in Q 5:7 (*wa-dhkurū nīmata llāhi ʿalaykum wa-mīthāqahu lladhī wāthaqakum bi-hi idh qultum samiʿnā wa-aḥḥanā*) is according to the *tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) either, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687–88) and al-Suddī (d. 127/745), referring to the pledge the Muslims gave the Prophet to hear and obey of the *ṣaḥāba* from Yathrib at ʿAqaba in year 622 CE,⁸⁷ or, on the authority of Mujāhid (d. 100–104/718–722), referring to the primordial covenant between God and man (with reference to Q 7:172, see below), of which al-Ṭabarī prefers the first interpretation.⁸⁸

Likewise, the reference of *mīthāq* in Q 13:20: *alladhīna yūfūna bi-ʿahdi llāhi wa-lā yanquḍūna l-mīthāqa*, as well as in 13:25: *wa-lladhīna yanquḍūna ʿahda llāhi min baʿdi mīthāqihī*, is ambiguous. It has been understood in the sense of man's covenant with God (with reference to Q 7:172).⁸⁹ It has however also been understood in the sense of inter-human agreements. This is the preferred understanding of al-Rāzī, who says that the covenant here refers to all that God has indicated (*bil-dalīl*) that he commands from man, including to fulfill mundane contracts (*al-waḥdā u bil-ʿuqūdi fil-muʿamalāti*).⁹⁰ Abdel Haleem translates the two passages according to the latter

something'. Then, in the early Qurʾānic conception the term takes on a specific meaning of guarding 'oneself against the imminent danger of divine chastisement by putting between it and one's own soul a protective shield of pious obedience and belief', until it reaches a stage where it has 'little or nothing to do with the concept of "fear" and becomes the nearest equivalent of "piety"' (Izutsu (1964) 2002: 260–265). Abdel Haleem does not in his translation subscribe to the idea of a chronological development of the term and states that the basic meaning is to be mindful or wary of something, and that translating it with 'fear of God' would be an 'over-expression of the term' (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004: 4, note c; Abdel Haleem 2004: xxxi). Accordingly he translates *taqwā* and the verbal cognate *ittaqa* with words connoting piety both in the Medinian *suwar* (Q 9:108 'consciousness of God'; 2:197 'to be mindful of God'; 2:237 'godliness'; 5:8 'awareness of God') and in the Meccan *suwar* (Q 96:12 'true piety'; 92:5 *ittaqa* as 'is mindful of God'; 74:56 *ahl al-taqwā* as 'the Lord who should be heeded'). I have here kept to mindful and mindfulness.

⁸⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* 6: 89: *bayatu l-muslimīna mina ṣaḥābi l-rasūli ṣalla llāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallama iyyāhu ʿala l-samʿi wal-tāʿati*.

⁸⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* 6: 89.

⁸⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* 6: 89. Muhammad Asad (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Asad] 1980) translates the term *al-mīthāq* in Q 13:20 with 'their covenant' and Arthur J. Arberry (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Arberry] 1964) translates it with 'the compact', both choices which retain the inherent ambiguity.

⁹⁰ Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 19: 38.

understanding, and puts the singular into plural to fit the chosen interpretation even better: '[T]hose who fulfil the agreements they make in God's name and do not break their pledges.' (Q 13:20) 'But there will be rejection for those who break their confirmed agreements made in God's name.' (Q 13:25)⁹¹

The divine covenant

References to the divine covenant are made throughout the text with a number of seemingly interchangeable notions in addition to *mīthāq*; such as 'pledge' (*ʿahd*; Q 2:27), 'promise' (*waʿd*; Q 30:4–6), 'witnessing' (*shahāda*; Q 7:172), and 'trust' (*amānah*; Q 33:72).⁹² That the covenant is conceptualised through different notions does not seem to be a major concern neither to the *tafsīr*, as we have seen in a few examples over, nor to the modern scholarly literature.⁹³ There may however be instances where important semantic distinctions might be drawn. In Q 2:40 the idea of a conditional covenant between God and the Banū Isrāʾīl is expressed: 'Children of Israel, remember how I blessed you. Honour your pledge (*ʿahd*) to Me and I will honour My pledge to you: I am the one you should fear.' The covenant between Banū Isrāʾīl and God is contractual and conditional, the verb *ʿahida* meaning 'to charge', 'to order', 'to promise' or 'to make a covenant', and the noun *ʿahd* meaning 'covenant', 'pact', 'command' or 'promise'.⁹⁴ According to Mustansir Mir, this term in the Qurʾān often signifies a promise of God in the sense of a unilateral obligation,⁹⁵ but the term may refer to divine as well as human pledges and contracts.⁹⁶ Any breaking of the *ʿahd* will be accounted for, as Ādam was accounted for breaking the *ʿahd* imposed on him not to eat from the tree of Paradise (Q 20:115). The covenantal relationship between God and man is here conceptualised as a contractual relationship where the aspect of trust from a semantic point of view is not necessarily as strong as it is in the *mīthāq*.

The pivotal covenant-passages according to Gwynne, as well as to some of the *tafsīr* literature,⁹⁷ is Q 7:172 in which the covenant is depicted 'not as a communal legacy but as an act by which every human soul individually accepts God as Lord.'⁹⁸

⁹¹ I have in these two passages retained Abdel Haleem's (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004) choice of words although I otherwise have chosen 'covenant' for *mīthāq* and 'pledge' for *ʿahd*.

⁹² According to Matthias Radscheit even the very notion of *al-kitāb* refers to a document, a (written) contract or covenant between God and man (Radscheit 1996: 119 f., following Künstlinger 1926; cf. Mårtensson 2008: 369).

⁹³ Darnell 1970; Wansbrough 1977: 8–11; Weiss 1990: 51–59; Mir 2001; Gwynne 2004: 1–24; Bosworth (1993) 2008; Mårtensson 2008.

⁹⁴ Lane (1877) 1984, 2: 2182 f.; Badawi & Abdel Haleem 2008: 650 f.

⁹⁵ Mir 2001.

⁹⁶ Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān* 3: 311: *al-ʿahdu kullu mā ʿūhida llāhu ʿalayhi wa-kullu mā bayna l-ʿibādi mina l-mawāthiq*.

⁹⁷ In his *tafsīr* on Q 13:20, al-Qurṭubī is alluding to 7:172 referred to as *al-mīthāq bi-ʿaynihi* (al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr* 9: 202).

[W]hen your Lord took out the offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam and made them bear witness about themselves (*ashhadahum ʿalā anfusihim*), He said, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ and they replied, ‘Yes, we bear witness (*shahadnā*).’ So you cannot say on the Day of resurrection, ‘We were not aware of this.’ (Q 7:172)

This *shahādah* is a confirmation of the divine covenant, as a preceding *āyah* is reminding the people that God had taken a covenant from them that they should only speak the truth about Him (*a-lam yuʿkhd ʿalayhim mīthāqu l-kitābi an lā yaqūlū ʿāla llāhi illa l-ḥaqqi*) (Q 7:169). The *shahādah*-passage thus refers to the primordial divine covenant which human beings accepted after the heavens and the earth had refused it (referred to as *amānah* in Q 33:72), and as Gwynne points out, God was already known to the audience and ‘the nature of his relationship to humans was a pre-existing condition of which they needed to be not so much taught as *reminded*.’⁹⁹ The covenant was renewed throughout history in accordance with God’s promise (*waʿd*):

God has made a promise to those among you who believe and do good deeds: He will make them successors¹⁰⁰ (*la-yastakhlifannahum*) of the land, as He did to those who came before them; He will strengthen the religion He has chosen for them; He will grant them security to replace their fear. ‘They worship Me and do not join anything with Me.’ (Q 24:55)

God is the stable and trustworthy part of the covenantal contract: ‘The words of your Lord are complete in their truth and justice (*ṣidqan wa-ʿadlan*).’ (Q 6:115) Man, on the other hand, is unstable, but will be called to account for the covenant given at the hands of the prophets:

We took a solemn pledge from the prophets—from you [Muḥammad], from Nūḥ, from Ibrāhīm, from Mūsā, from ʿIsā, son of Maryam—We took a solemn covenant from all of them so that He will question (*li-yasʾala*¹⁰¹) the truthful (*al-ṣādiqīna*) about their sincerity, and He has prepared a painful punishment for those who reject the truth (*al-kāfirīna*). (Q 33:7 f.)

‘Some were true to the divine covenant (*ṣadaqū mā ʿāhadu llāha ʿalayhi*)’ (Q 33:23), and others declined (Q 2:63 f., cited below).

Human history in the Qurʾān is thus a history about people’s truthfulness which shows itself in how they have related to the divine covenant, and about what their outcome was. Their commitment to the divine covenant is echoing the primordial covenant (Q 7:172), an event referred to as the covenant day (*yawm al-mīthāq*) in *ṣūfi*

⁹⁸ Gwynne 2004: 2.

⁹⁹ Gwynne 2004: 7.

¹⁰⁰ According to Abdel Haleem ‘successor’ is the basic meaning of *khalīfah*, although other possible translations are ‘viceregent’, ‘deputy’ or ‘trustee’. (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004: 7, footnote a). The translation ‘trustee’ is neither attested by Lane, nor by Penrice, nor is this semantic content specified in the lexicographical sources available to me. Ibn Fāris states as one of three root meanings of the root *kh-l-f* ‘something following after something taking its place’ (Ibn Fāris, *Muʿjam* 2: 210: *yajīʾ shayʾun baʿda shayʾin yaqūmu maqāmihi*), which in its semantic content seems quite close to *wakīl*. In contemporary literature this aspect of the word *khalīfah* is often emphasised (see for instance Dien 2000: 75). In the following I will translate the term ‘successor’ but keeping in mind the element of trust in its semantic content.

¹⁰¹ I have chosen to make the causal relationship between the two statements explicit by translating the phrase *li-yasʾala* with ‘so that He will question’ where Abdel Haleem (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004) merely implies the causality with a colon.

literature,¹⁰² and will reach its conclusion on resurrection day (*yawm al-qiyāma*; Q 7:172), both ‘days’ outside of historical time. Within historical time the covenant was enjoined upon the first man and prophet, Ādam, who forgot it (Q 20:115).¹⁰³ All of Ādam’s progeny is encompassed by God’s command to abjure the devil and to serve God alone (Q 36:60 f.). Then the covenant was renewed with the prophet Mūsá, but Banū Isrāʾīl, after having accepted it, first violated it, and then refused it (Q 2:83–86, 92 f.). In Q 5:12 f. they break the covenant through distorting the divine word (*yu-harrifūna al-kalima*). When the Christians were given their chance at keeping the covenant, they in their turn forgot parts of the divine message (*fa-nasū haẓẓan min-mā dhukkirū bi-hi*) and were as a consequence inflicted with inner conflicts (Q 5:14).

The text does not mention a divine covenant specifically concluded with the prophet Muḥammad or any equivalent to what Gwynne refers to as ‘the mosaic Covenant-event on Sinai’,¹⁰⁴ although Q 5:7 and 13:20–25 has been regarded as such.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, the general admonitions throughout the Qurʾān text echoing the covenant lend themselves easily to be read as directed to Muḥammad and the Muslims, as they were the immediate receivers of the Qurʾān. The divine covenantal promise given to them is essentially the same as that given to those who went before them, but their outcome is still open (Q 3:194–198). It rests on how they choose to relate to it, how they choose to undertake what in the ethico-religious discourse is conceptualised as the covenant between human beings and God referred to as the *amānah*:

We offered the Trust (*al-amānah*) to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, yet they refused to undertake it and were afraid of it; mankind undertook it—they have always been inept and foolish. (Q 33:72)

Human trustworthiness—*amānah*

The *maṣḍar amānah* is derived from one of the most ubiquitous roots in the Qurʾān:¹⁰⁶ *ʾ-m-n*. According to Ibn Fāris, the root meaning of *ʾ-m-n* is double, although he admits the two senses are close: ‘One is trust which is opposite to betrayal, and its meaning is inner peace (*sukūn al-qalb*), and the other is confirmation (*taṣdīq*).’ He assigns first and foremost the sense of inner peace to *amana* (form I) and the sense of belief to *āmana* (form IV).¹⁰⁷ Ibn Manẓūr explains initially the three main notions to be discussed under the lemma *ʾ-m-n* by their opposites: *amn* (‘safety’) is

¹⁰² Massignon 1962.

¹⁰³ Ādam’s forgetfulness in this *āyah* has according to Gwynne resulted in some ambiguity of Ādam’s status among the prophets. She is referring to al-Ṭabarī interpreting it as a weakness on Ādam’s side (Gwynne 2004: 4).

¹⁰⁴ Gwynne 2004: 6.

¹⁰⁵ Weiss 1990: 53 ff.; Darnell 1970: 114.

¹⁰⁶ Through 19 derivatives the root occurs 858 times in the Qurʾān (Badawi & Abel Haleem 2008: 50).

¹⁰⁷ Ibn Fāris, *Muʿjam* 1: 133.

the opposite of fear, *amānah* (‘trust’) is the opposite of betrayal and *īmān* (‘faith’) is the opposite of denial.¹⁰⁸ As a verbal noun (*maṣḍar*), the term *amānah* has both an abstract and a material meaning, and according to al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī it denotes sometimes the state (*ḥāl*) of a person and sometimes whatever has been entrusted to him.¹⁰⁹ According to the *al-wujūh wal-naẓāʾir* works of al-Dāmaghānī and Ibn al-Jawzī the notion of *amānah* has three aspects in the Qurʾān: *farāʾiḍ* (‘obligatory matters’; Q 8:27; 33:72), *wadāʾiʿ* (‘deposits’; Q 4:58; 23:8; 70:32) and, by way of the cognate participle *amīn*, *ʿiffah* (‘integrity’ or ‘honesty’; Q 28:26).¹¹⁰

In the sense of *farāʾiḍ amānah* refers to ‘obligatory matters’, as in Q 8:27: ‘Believers, do not betray God and the Messenger, or knowingly betray what is entrusted to you (*wa-takhūnū amānātikum wa-antum taʿlamūna*).’¹¹¹ In the preceding *āyah*, Q 8:26, man is reminded that it is by the grace of God he has been delivered from a position of weakness and victimisation (*qalīlun mustaḍʿafūna fil-arḍi*) to victory and prosperity (*wa-ʾayyadakum bi-naṣrihi wa-razaqakum*), and in the following, Q 8:28, man is reminded that with gifts follow responsibility; he is tested through his dealings when it comes to his wealth and his children (*innamā amwālukum wa-awlādukum fitnatun*). The believers should then be conscious to keep their obligations towards God and the Messenger with regards to what has been placed under their care when they find themselves in a position of power and prosperity.

Al-Zamakhsharī is paraphrasing *al-amānah* in Q 33:72 with obedience (*ṭāʿah*) and conceptualising the *amānah* within the framework of the covenant and human responsibility (*taklīf*): ‘it is appropriate for him to be charged with God’s commands and prohibitions as he is an animal endowed with reason and capable of taking upon himself responsibility.’¹¹² The general emphasis on keeping social contracts and obligations reflects this higher obligation towards the primordial covenant between God and man, voluntarily undertaken by man. Man is obliged to return any *amānah* entrusted to him: ‘God commands you to return things entrusted to you to their rightful owners,’ (Q 4:58) and he is urged to be faithful to his trusts and pledges (Q 23:8; 70:32). It is in man’s own interest to keep the trust relationship, as human salvation lies in fulfilling the covenant with God. It is the hallmark of man’s humanness, and breaking it will lead to God’s curse and destruction (Q 13:20–25).

¹⁰⁸ Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān* 13: 21: *al-amnu ʿiddu l-khawfi wal-amānatu ʿiddu l-khiyānati wal-īmānu ʿiddu l-kufri*.

¹⁰⁹ Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt*: 35.

¹¹⁰ Al-Dāmaghānī, *al-Wujūh*: 73; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Nuḥat*: 24.

¹¹¹ Abdel Haleem’s (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004) translation runs as follows: ‘or knowingly betray [other people’s] trust in you’.

¹¹² Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashāf* 3: 547: *wa-yalīqu bi-hi mina l-inqiyādi li-awāmiri llāhi wa-nawāḥithi wa-huwa ḥayawānun ʿāqilun ṣāliḥun lil-taklīf*. Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī offers different explanations for *amānah* in this *āyah*: divine unity (*tawḥīd*), integrity (*ʿadāla*), the alphabet (*al-hurūf al-tahajjī*) and reason (*ʿaql*). However he prefers the latter on account of reason being instrumental in gaining insight in the divine unity, developing integrity and learning the alphabet (al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt*: 35).

Human responsibility

In Q 57:7 f. another reference is made between human responsibility, accountability and the divine covenant. Man has been entrusted in the capacity of a *khalīfah* ('successor'), has been made responsible to spend accordingly, and will be called to account for his actions and for his pledges (Q 17:34; 25:16; 33:15). This is rooted in the primordial divine covenant:

Believe (*āminū*) in God and His Messenger, and give of what He has made pass down to you (*mā jāʿalakum mustakhlifina fihī*)¹¹³: those of you who believe and give will have a great reward. Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls you to believe in your Lord, and He has already made a covenant with you (*wa-qad akhadha mīthāqakum*), if you have faith. (Q 57:7 f.)¹¹⁴

The connection is further emphasised in Q 2:27–30:

[T]hose who break their pledge with God after it has been covenanted (*alladhīna yanquḍūna ʿahda llāhi min baʿdi mīthāqihī*), who sever the bonds that God has commanded to be joined, who spread corruption on the earth—these are the losers. How can you ignore God when you were lifeless and He gave you life, when He will cause you to die, then resurrect you to be returned to Him? It was He who created all that is on the earth for you (*huwa lladhi khalaqa la-kum mā fil-arḍi jamīʿan*), then turned to the sky and made the seven heavens; it is He who has knowledge of all things. [W]hen your Lord told the angels, 'I am putting a successor on earth (*innī jāʿilun fil-arḍi khalīfatan*),' they said, 'How can You put someone there who will cause damage and bloodshed, when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?' but He said, 'I know things you do not know.'

Indeed, their very humanness depends upon whether they carry out their responsibilities towards God, as pointed out by Ulrika Mårtensson.¹¹⁵ In a narrative the reader is told about a people who denied abiding by the regulations God had laid down for them, whereupon they were turned into apes (Q 7:166). Then the reader is reminded that a covenant had been taken from these people (*a-lam yukhḍadh ʿalayhim mīthāqu l-kitābi*; Q 7:169). Thus obeying God is intrinsic to true human nature, as expressed in the qurʾānic concept of *fiṭra* (Q 30:30). I would suggest that in Q 2:63–66, the connection between the moral claim, the covenant and humanness is made even more explicit by a similar account being addressed to the reader directly:

Remember when We took your covenant (*akhadhnā mīthāqakum*), and made the mountain tower high above you, and said, 'Hold fast to what We have given you and bear its contents in mind, so that you may be mindful of God (*laʿallakum tattaqūna*).' Even after that you turned away. Had it not been for God's favour and mercy on you, you would certainly have been lost. You know about those of you who broke the Sabbath, and so We said to them, 'Be apes (*kūnū qirdatan*)!'¹¹⁶ Be outcasts! We made this as an example to those people who

¹¹³ The trust element is emphasised in the translation of Pickthall (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Pickthall] 1948): '[S]pend of that whereof He hath made you trustees.'

¹¹⁴ Cf. also *āyāt* emphasising that earthly goods, children and even one's life is but a trial: Q 2:155; 3:186; 8:28.

¹¹⁵ Mårtensson 2008: 377.

¹¹⁶ Abdel Haleem (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004) translates *kūnū qirdatan* 'be as apes', interpreting the expression here as a figure of speech. Historically the expression has been interpreted both literally and metaphorically. Ibn Kathīr traces the two interpretations respectively to the *ṣaḥābī* Ibn ʿAbbās

were there at the time and to those who came after them, and a lesson to all who are mindful of God (*lil-muttaqīn*). (Q 2:63–66)

The relation between God's promise to the righteous believer (*waʿada llāhu lladhīna ʿāmanū munkum wa-ʿamilu l-ṣāliḥāti*), human empowerment (*la-yastakhliʿannahum*) and security (*wa-la-yubaddilannahum min ʿaḍi khawfihim amnan*) has been established in Q 24:55, as referred to above. Mårtensson further argues for a linkage between the political body of the city-state, the written constitution-covenant¹¹⁷ and 'social trust' in *sūrat al-Ṭīn* (Q 95:2–3) where Mount Sinai (*Ṭūr Sīnīn*) symbolises the written covenant of the Prophet Mūsā (cf. Q 2:87) and the secure City (*al-balad al-amīn*) is that of the political community of those who have faith (*al-muʾminīna*; cf. Q 95:6). The 'secure City' is by Mårtensson interpreted as 'social trust', that is a security provided by the citizens. If we turn to al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, he certainly identifies Ṭūr Sīnīn with Jabal Mūsā, which implies an obvious reference to the divine covenant Mūsā was given, but he also identifies *al-balad al-amīn* with Makkah, with reference to Q 29:67.¹¹⁸ 'Can they not see that We have granted them a secure sanctuary though all around them people are snatched away?' It may thus be more reasonable to interpret the 'secure City' as a 'divine trust' than a 'social trust'.¹¹⁹ This is further substantiated by the way the *āyah* Q 95:3 echoes the prayer of the prophet Ibrāhīm when he was circulating the Kaʿba with Ismāʿīl after having build it: 'My Lord, make this land secure (*ijʿal hādha baladan āminan*) and provide with produce (*wa-rzuq*) those of its people who believe in God and the Last Day.' (Q 2:126)¹²⁰ The security of Makkah is here a divine grace intimately associated with the faith of the people, as it is in Q 14:35 and even more explicitly in Q 16:112:

God presents the example of a town that was secure and at peace (*āminan muṭmainnatan*), with provisions coming to it abundantly from all places. Then it became ungrateful for God's blessings (*fa-kafarat bi-anʿumi llāhi*), so God afflicted it with the garment of famine and fear (*khawf*), for what its people had done.

Being sympathetic to the idea that the 'implication of "security" (*amn*) attached to "faith" (*īmān*) is given additional emphasis when mentioned in relation to *mūthāq*',¹²¹ I have come quite close to making the same argument. Mårtensson is however

and the *tabīʿī* Mujaḥid Ibn Jabr (d. 100–104/718–722) (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr* 1: 106 f.). A strictly literal translation, 'be apes', accommodates however both interpretations without favouring one over the other.

¹¹⁷ Rosalind Ward Gwynne examines the qurʾānic notions of the covenant in view of a schema of Late Bronze Era covenants developed by George Mendelhall and Gary Herion, and finds many parallel features (Gwynne 2004: 7 ff., with reference to Mendelhall & Herion 1997: 1181). Gwynne does not however make the more radical claims about the genealogy of the covenant that Mårtensson does when the latter suggests an Aristotelian origin to the qurʾānic idea of the covenant (Mårtensson 2008: 375 ff.). In a more conventional way John Wansbrough (1977:10) is tracing the qurʾānic idea of the covenant back to the Pentateuchal *berit*.

¹¹⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* 30: 241 ff.

¹¹⁹ It is attested that this morphological pattern, the *faʿʿil*, commonly called an active participle, can entail both an active and a passive sense. When passive it may refer to the future (Wright 1981 [1874], 1: 133, 136; 2: 196), hence the statement can be read as a promise for the future of Makkah.

¹²⁰ The *āyah* echoes Q 65:2 f. referred above where material provision (*rizq*) is associated with *tawakkul*.

¹²¹ Mårtensson 2008: 379.

substantiating her argument by referring to Q 8:55 f., where the Arabic word is *‘ahd*, not *mīthāq*. Mårtensson is here following John Wansbrough’s argument on *‘ahd* and *mīthāq* being synonyms and both used for divine and inter-human covenantal relationship.¹²² But on the other hand, in an example that does contain the word *mīthāq*, Q 8:72,¹²³ security is only to be provided for people seeking protection if there is no *mīthāq* with the ones they are seeking protection from. In other words, security will be guaranteed conditionally; first to those with whom there is a *mīthāq*, second to those with whom there is no *mīthāq* neither with them nor with their enemies.

Honouring agreements

The emphasis on honouring agreements is in the Qur’ān expressed in the notion *wafā’*, ‘being faithful to an engagement’, or ‘promise’.¹²⁴ Al-Dāmāghānī notes two aspects of *wafā’*. The first is ‘completion’ (*al-tamām*), as in the cognate verb *waffā* in *sūrat al-najm*: ‘And Ibrāhīm who fulfilled his duty’ (*alladhī waffā*; Q 53:37). The second aspect given is ‘fulfilment of pledges and promises’ (*al-wafā’u bil-‘ahdi wal-wa‘di*), as in Q 2:40 cited above.¹²⁵ It can however be argued that the second aspect is closer to be a specification of the first than a different one.

Izutsu sees *wafā’* as one of the main components of the pre-Islamic virtue of *murūwah*, ‘being a complete human being with regards to chastity of manners and manly perfection’.¹²⁶ According to him, *murūwah* (alternative orthography: *murū‘ah*) was a key concept of pre-Islamic morality, ‘all the ideal virtues of the desert combined into one’.¹²⁷ *Wafā’* is in the Qur’ān an equally important value, but in the Qur’ānic discourse transformed from ‘the Jāhilī virtue of loyalty [that] was largely a

¹²² Wansbrough 1977: 9.

¹²³ This example is also taken from Wansbrough 1977: 9.

¹²⁴ Lane (1877) 1984: 2: 3057.

¹²⁵ Al-Dāmāghānī, *al-Wujūh*: 473. As an example of the last aspect, ‘fulfilment of pledges and promises’, al-Dāmāghānī provides Q 5:1 (*awfū bil-‘uqūd*) with the remark that *al-‘uqūd* is synonymous to *al-‘uhūd* (al-Dāmāghānī, *al-Wujūh*: 64) where *al-wafā’* is given as an aspect of *al-itmām*.

¹²⁶ Izutsu (1959) 1966: 27, 86 ff.; cf. Lane (1877) 1984, 2: 2702. Although possibly translatable as ‘man-ness’, Izutsu points out that the concept is immersed in the atmosphere of desert life to the extent that its meaning as a semantic category can only be understood through a proper understanding of it. Even if we in this case are able to translate the term in a similar structure, it still needs to be qualified by a contextual interpretation. While Ibn Fāris glosses *murūwah* as ‘utter manliness’ (*kamāl al-rujūliyyah*) (Ibn Fāris, *Mu‘jam* 5: 315), al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī insists that the sense of *murūwah* is a gender neutral ‘utter humanness’ just as the sense of *rujūliyyah* is ‘utter manliness’. (al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt*: 468: *kamāl al-mar’i ka-mā anna l-rujūliyyata kamālu l-rajuli*) In his *Kitāb al-dharī‘ah ilā makārim al-sharī‘ah* he elaborates on this point stating that the notion of *murūwah* has two semantic extensions: a general sense of ‘humanness’ and a more specific sense of ‘manliness’ as opposed to ‘womanliness’. Hence in addition to the contextualisation Izutsu recommends, conceptualisations of *murūwah* will be dependent upon the implied semantic content since according to al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī some female virtues are male vices and vice versa (al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-dharī‘ah*: 116).

¹²⁷ Izutsu (1959) 1966: 27 f.

matter of kinship by blood’,¹²⁸ to a virtue originated in the covenant between God and man.¹²⁹ Trustworthiness as humanness is an idea we have come across earlier, and here again the same idea is echoed in that the human being owes fulfilling his pledge (*‘ahd*) not only to God,¹³⁰ and to the Prophet,¹³¹ but even to himself:

Those who pledge loyalty to you (*yubāyī‘ūnaka*) are actually pledging loyalty to God Himself (*innamā yubāyī‘ūna llāha*)—God’s hand is placed on theirs—and anyone who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment (*fa-man nakatha fa-innamā yankuthu ‘alā nafsīhi*): God will give a great reward to the one who fulfils his pledge (*‘ahd*) to Him. (Q 48:10)

A common word in the Qurʾān for agreement is *‘ahd*. As we have seen it is a word understood both in the meaning of divine covenant and in the meaning of mundane pledges. Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Dāmaghānī points to *wafā’* or *wafā’ bil-amānah* as one of several aspects of the word *‘ahd* itself,¹³² as exemplified in Q 9:4:

As for those among the polytheists¹³³ who have honoured the pledge (*‘ahd*) you have made with them and have not supported anyone against you: fulfil your pledge with them to the end of their term. God loves those who are mindful of him.

The term *‘aqd*, ‘contract’, ‘agreement’ and ‘engagement’,¹³⁴ is used for a whole range of different types of contracts in Islamic legal tradition. However, this word occurs only a few times in the Qurʾān. In Q 5:1 fulfilling one’s contracts (*‘uqūd*, sing. *‘aqd*) is imposed upon the believer.¹³⁵ In al-Zamakhsharī’s *tafsīr* this command is explained as working on two levels simultaneously; it refers on one hand to the commands God has put upon the believers, and indeed in the textual context of this verse several religious obligations and prohibitions are given, such as dietary rules and regulations (Q 5:3–5). On the other hand it refers to the contracts and agreements the believers have concluded between themselves. Here the two discourses of ethical-religious and social ethics intersect according to al-Zamakhsharī’s interpretation, as maintaining the inter-human contracts is a way of maintaining the command of God.¹³⁶

¹²⁸ Izutsu (1959) 1966: 86, cf. also page 75.

¹²⁹ Izutsu (1959) 1966: 86 f. Here it can be noted however that the kinship loyalty is not altogether neglected in the Qurʾānic message, as the *mushrikūn* are rebuked for neither respecting kinship (*illan*) nor treaty (*dhimma*) describing them as two-faced (*yurḍānakum bi-afwāhihim wa-ta’bā qulūbuhum*) and transgressors (*fāsiqūn*) (Q 9:8, 10).

¹³⁰ Referring to a mutual pledge, where God promises that the outcome for the obedient will be Paradise Q 9:111: ‘God has purchased the persons and possessions of the believers in return for the Garden—they fight in God’s way: they kill and are killed – this is a true promise (*wa’d*) given by Him in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qurʾān. Who could be more faithful to his pledge than God (*wa-man awfā bi-‘ahdihi mina llahi*)? So be happy with the bargain you have made: that is the supreme triumph.’

¹³¹ The historical reference of Q 48:10 is according to al-Ṭabarī (*Tafsīr* 26: 47) the pledge of loyalty (*bay‘ah*) given at Hudaibiyyah (6/628).

¹³² Ibn al-Jawzī, *Nuḥat*: 196; al-Dāmaghānī, *al-Wujūh*: 332.

¹³³ The phrase ‘among the polytheists’ is omitted in Abdel Haleem’s translation (*The Qurʾān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004).

¹³⁴ Lane (1877) 1984, 2: 2105–2106.

¹³⁵ *‘Aqd* and *‘ahd* are seen as synonyms (al-Dāmaghānī, *al-Wujūh*: 473).

¹³⁶ Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashaf* 1: 589.

Conditional trust

Against a background of the covenant-idea it may seem like trust in the Qur²ān is based on an implicit agreement. Is this implicit agreement then grounded in a set of norms, and are these norms specific or universal? Fulfilling the covenant with God is the best guaranty for trustworthiness in any person. However, although trustworthiness is associated with belief there is no unambiguous urge to automatically distrust unbelievers. Rather we can distinguish a form of contextual and situational trust, for instance when it comes to Muslims trusting people outside of the Muslim community. Keeping a pledge (*ʿahd*) is put forward as a universal value, something which all people of high moral standard will do regardless of their religious affiliation:

There are people of the Book who, if you entrust them (*man taʿmanhu*) with a heap of gold, will return it to you intact, but there are others of them who, if you entrust them with a single dinar, will not return it to you unless you keep standing over them, because they say, ‘We are under no obligations towards the gentiles (*al-ummiyyīn*)’¹³⁷—they tell a lie against God and they know it. No indeed! God loves those who keep their pledges and are mindful of Him (*balā man awfā bi-ʿahdihi wa-ttaqā fa-inna llāha yhibbu l-muttaqīna*). (Q 3:75–76)

The believers are in the Qur²ān warned against taking unbelievers and hypocrites as friends (*awliyāʾ*) if and as long as they ridicule the belief: ‘[I]f you hear people denying and ridiculing God’s revelation, do not sit with them unless they start to talk of other things, or else you yourselves will become like them.’ (Q 4:140) The believer is enjoined to neither trust nor distrust fellow human beings unconditionally, but to consider the person in question with regards to both his attitude and his behaviour. The Qur²ān does not simply enjoin trust upon certain categories of people, but rather conditions trusting with certain values and behavioural patterns. This can also be understood as a means of assessing what Annette Baier calls ‘the discretionary powers’ of the trustee which forms the ‘unwritten background conditions and exceptions’ to any trust situation.¹³⁸ In Q 4:58 it seems like these discretionary powers are valued when the trustee is obligated to use their sound judgement guided by one of the core values of the qur²ānic message, namely justice (*ʿadl, qist*): ‘God commands you [people] to return things entrusted to you to their rightful owners, and, if you judge between people, to do so with justice (*ʿadl*).’

¹³⁷ Abdel Haleem’s translation (*The Qur²ān* [transl. Abdel Haleem] 2004) is in accordance with what Lane calls the proper meaning of the term (Lane (1877) 1984, 1: 92), here ‘gentile’ in the sense from the non-Israilite nations; see also Badawi & Abdel Haleem 2008: 49 where the word *ummi* has either the sense ‘unlettered’ or ‘a pagan, a person with no revealed scripture’. According to al-Dāmaghānī the word has three different aspects of meaning in the Qur²ān: *al-ʿarab* (Q 62:2); *al-yahūd* (Q 2:78); and the illiterate (*alladhī lā yaktubu say²an wa-lā yaqrā²u*; Q 7:157) (al-Dāmaghānī, *al-Wujūh*: 63 f.).

¹³⁸ Baier 1986: 251.

Closing remarks

The relationship between God and man can in view of the qurʾānic message to some extent be seen as a mutual trust. God is entrusting man with a specific sphere of action through the covenant (*mīthāq*) and the concept of human responsibility. To be trustworthy is something man owes to God and to himself because of the covenant, respecting his own acceptance of the covenant, and protecting his own humanness by it. It may seem that in the Qurʾān trusting, both trusting God and trusting man, is a form of implicit or explicit choice, based on knowledge of the trustee, whether this knowledge is innate in human nature inherited from the era of the primordial covenant, or is gained through revelation or experience. Even those people who have a natural disposition towards trusting are guided to put their trust in God before anyone else.

When it comes to the social ethics, for a large part the same conceptual framework is in play, only now the normative claim on the human being is reversed. The normative emphasis is put on being trustworthy and fulfilling one's obligations. My contention is that the two discourses of ethico-religious and social ethics in the Qurʾān are informed by each other and that they converge in the concept of a covenant between God and the human kind which is conceptualised as a moral ground serving as a basis for inter-human ethical and legally institutionalised trust-based relationships.

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